

Footsteps with character: the art and craft of Foley

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One of the attendant features of contemporary Hollywood sound style is the heightened treatment of the smallest of sonic details, as if sound practitioners intend audiences to hear the unhearable. These aural closeups are not so much exaggerated from their real-world context as audibly distinguished to convey narrative details that otherwise would be lost in the din of a film's busy soundscape. One such example can be found in the cafeteria jam sequence in *Fame* (Kevin Tancharoen, 2009), when a group of students spontaneously breaks into a roughly choreographed song-and-dance number. Amidst a busy background track of crowd noise and an array of foregrounded diegetic instruments including electric guitar, electric bass, drums, violin and piano, we can also distinguish the intricate movement of a tap dancer's shoes, the air *whooshes* that accompany his dizzying turns, and the brush and whisper of his clothes. In large measure, the level of detail and definition present in this example is symptomatic of the complexity and ambition of modern sound style and practice.

Turning the smallest of sounds into large sonic gestures has been the domain of Foley since the conversion to the sound period. Developments in 24-track recording technology and the proliferation of digital audio workstations have transformed the aesthetic textures of Foley sound effects and the occupational identities of Foley performers in ways that have reconfigured task structures and stylistic conventions. In contemporary practice, direct-to-picture professionals, as they were once known, have achieved a level of creative autonomy such that many now call themselves Foley *artists*.

1 Personal interview with John Roesch, 23 June 2009.

At one level, the shift in designation from Foley ‘walker’ to ‘artist’ is representative of the broader institutional changes that accompanied the transition of sound effects editors from mechanical labourers to creative decision-makers throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s. Indeed, it was not uncommon in the studio era to mistake a Foley practitioner for a sound editor, since the work of syncing sound effects to picture was similar and, perhaps more significantly, many sound editors performed and cut their own Foley effects. In the past decade, however, the degree to which performance and digital technology can be tied to the task structure of the Foley artist, together with a series of developments surrounding the representation of Foley professionals by Hollywood craft unions and guilds, have signified a crucial shift in direct-to-picture sound recording and performance. According to Foley artist John Roesch, ‘Now with digital advances, as far as sound quality goes, the playing field has been leveled somewhat. Really, the big determining factor is not technical anymore, it’s strictly artistic.’¹

In this essay I look more closely at modern Foley performance and aesthetics, giving special attention to the customized nature of Foley effects and the importance of creating sound with ‘character’. What interests me is not only how Foley professionals have negotiated their role as sound *artists* but how the professional goals of Foley have shifted in response to the increasing use of digital audio workstations. I consider the rise of Foley artistry to be a consequence of the freelance nature of modern Hollywood film production. In the past twenty-five years, Foley has become the site of significant technological and stylistic activity at the levels of recording, mixing and performance. Whereas the artistic value of Foley has been historically defined by a rigid set of conventions, modern Foley practice and the professionals who design and perform direct-to-picture effects carry out duties that now increasingly emphasize the dramatic texture of an otherwise ordinary sound. In addition to providing synchronized effects that serve the picture, modern Foley practice might therefore be considered as a performance art. In turn, the social and functional tasks of the Foley artist have expanded in ways that reflect their status as sound effects creators and performance artists. Unfortunately, despite some utopian attitudes expressed in trade publications about the new-found independence of Foley professionals, this development has not drastically redefined the work of Hollywood sound professionals, nor has it slowed the industry’s budgetary cutbacks in postproduction and the frequency of shorter schedules in the audio postproduction field.

As a commercial standard of sound reproduction in radio, television, film and videogames, Foley sound serves two broad functions: first, to replace and reinforce particular elements from the production track and match the sync to the original recording; second, to ‘sweeten’ – that is, to enhance – material that is otherwise not in the jurisdiction of sound effects editorial. To this end, Foley sound serves the dramatic functions of the narrative by characterizing and dramatizing the smallest of diegetic sounds. Although the social and aesthetic tasks are similar to those in sound editorial (effects,

2 Dramatic 'feel' can be considered one of the many metaphorical phrases adopted by sound practitioners to describe their work creating sounds in the film and recording industries. Metaphors such as 'warm', 'bright' and 'full' connote the abstract technical demands of sound production. See Thomas Porcello, 'Speaking of sound: language and the professionalization of sound-recording engineers', *Social Studies of Science*, vol. 34, no. 5 (2004), p. 735.

3 Stephen Bottomore, 'The story of Percy Peashaker: debates about sound effects in the early cinema', in Richard Abel and Rick Altman (eds), *The Sounds of Early Cinema* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 132.

4 Vanessa Theme Ament, *The Foley Grail: the Art of Performing Sound for Film, Games, and Animation* (Burlington, MA: Focal Press, 2009), p. 7.

dialogue and Automated Dialogue Replacement [ADR]), Foley has experienced a significant shift in terms of its ideological operations that has become less about matching sync and more about capturing the dramatic 'feel' of sound effects.²

Film historian Stephen Bottomore has shown that from the early years of the twentieth century, films in the USA and Europe were often accompanied by sound effects, produced by skilled operators using a wide array of 'traps' or sound effects machines. By the mid 1910s, Bottomore suggests that audiences had become accustomed to the attendant sounds that filled out the audiovisual experience, and were critical of theatres that employed unskilled performers or utilized 'inaccurate' sounds for particular imagery.³ In many ways, the logic of practice that had shaped early sound accompaniment was inherited by the organization of synchronized Foley effects in the years that followed. By 1929 Hollywood sound engineers had still not completely solved the representational dilemmas of synchronized sound film. In the first few years of synchronized sound filmmaking, Hollywood films rarely employed complex marriages of dialogue, music and effects, preferring instead to concentrate on dialogue, nondiegetic music and the occasional narratively pertinent sound effect. Equally, the manner in which specific sound effects were recorded, and the logic concerning an effect's placement in the final mix, had not yet been secured through convention. One of the more challenging aspects of sound production in the conversion era was achieving accurate synchronization with particular effects, such as footsteps and handclaps. Since most actors had different walking cadences, it proved to be difficult for engineers to match a 78-rpm recording of footsteps properly with the picture.

In 1928, as Universal Pictures was preparing a large-scale silent adaptation of *Show Boat* (Harry Pollard, 1929), the mass shift to synchronized sound was already underway at other studios. Midway through production, Universal decided to release the film as a 'talkie' in an attempt to capitalize on the trending popularity of synchronized sound. Universal rented the Fox-Case sound-on-film system and reshot some sequences, including a lengthy prologue, and postsynchronized the rest of the film with added dialogue, music and effects. When the studio's sound engineers had difficulty synching a variety of complicated visual gestures, a journeyman employee in the studio's prop department named Jack Foley had the idea of synchronizing 'live' sound effects to the projected picture. Foley and a small crew of engineers and props people performed a variety of sound effects, including handclaps, footsteps and background chatter, while viewing the projected film during the orchestra's recording session.

After *Show Boat*, Foley continued to perform sound effects for the early talkies, focusing on props, footsteps and the occasional cloth effect to emphasize a character's costume. As Vanessa Theme Ament suggests, direct-to-picture sound recording was invented out of necessity, and did not fit into an established occupational role or follow a set of established conventions.⁴ However, the functional specificity of Foley's performance techniques was not dissimilar from sound effects accompaniments in the

nonsynchronized era of cinema. Sound effects technicians would routinely take their cues from actors and moments that supported the dramatic texture of the narrative, adding both realism and emotional weight to the silent images.

Within a decade, every major studio in Hollywood developed its own system of direct-to-picture recording, even though the practice would not be referred to as 'Foley effects' until 1962, when Desi Arnaz and Lucille Ball's Desilu television studio built its own direct-to-picture sound stage and named it the 'Foley Stage'. During his forty-year tenure at Universal, Foley performed direct-to-picture effects that were considered more than mere technical accomplishments of matching sync. Foley became known for imparting an artistic sensibility to the footfalls and cadences of certain high-profile actors. In a sense, his work could be characterized as neither editing nor mixing, and thus 'Foley' became an element of the sound world unto itself. In 1962 Foley was awarded an honorary membership of the Motion Picture Sound Editors Society, but the question of where Foley performers fitted into the existing labour structure of Hollywood sound production had yet to be addressed.

Between 1929 and 1960, direct-to-picture sound was highly routinized, with practitioners working within a fairly rigid system of conventions. Performers worked with teams of mixers, editors and assistants on sound stages equipped with various ground surfaces (wood, concrete, dirt) and an extensive array of props to replicate the sounds of the objects handled by characters on screen. The studio system evolved a structured training programme for direct-to-picture performers, which, in line with the development of the apprenticeship system in the 1930s, meant that only experienced editors could perform direct-to-picture effects after spending time as an assistant, an editor, and finally as a supervisor in the studio sound department. This formal training system was abandoned when the major studios dissolved their postproduction assets in the 1960s and into the early 1970s, leaving many entry-level and assistant direct-to-picture performers without a stable work structure. With no formal training or apprenticeship system, the pedigree of modern Foley performers became increasingly diverse; many now have backgrounds in dance, sound editing, film directing, radio and broadcast engineering, as well as acting. The institutional rigour of Foley performance has therefore come under scrutiny in recent years, since it remains a unique, if not entirely eccentric, aspect of the sound production process.

The question of professional identity has shaped the history of Foley performers in Hollywood on both practical and aesthetic levels. Until 2006, Foley performers were not recognized by Hollywood labour organizations as a distinctive unit of sound professionals; indeed, some performers were members of the Screen Actors Guild (SAG), others were part of the Editors Guild, while the great majority belonged nowhere. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, a small group of sound professionals composed mostly of Foley performers attempted to secure union representation and codify a working job description for direct-to-picture practitioners. According to Foley artist

5 Personal interview with Alyson Dee Moore, 10 November 2009.

Alyson Dee Moore, Foley performers have historically been caught in an occupational ‘grey area’ because they were strictly neither sound editors, mixers nor actors. What was essentially at stake for Foley performers was a definition of tasks and duties that could be applied to the ways in which practitioners organized their workflow for a film project. ‘There was nothing to indicate who could do what’, Moore notes. ‘Where was the line? Could a Foley artist also cue and edit Foley?’⁵ In addition, the Foley group did not have numbers on their side. With fewer than one hundred active performers in the industry, the group was petitioning on behalf of an extremely small sampling of non-unionized workers, some of whom already belonged to the Editors Guild.

Attempts to court the Screen Actors Guild had, by 2002, fallen short, since most Foley practitioners had no background in the performing arts. However, the Guild did represent ADR loop group performers, who fell under the jurisdiction of postproduction sound, but this was not enough to convince SAG representatives that Foley performers were worth the investment. Then, in 2005, Foley representatives turned to the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, who offered them an opportunity to join their ranks even though the Teamsters did not represent any postproduction practitioners in the film industry. Representing labourers and transportation workers in film, theatre and television, the Teamsters were willing to work with Foley artists since this could potentially open up further opportunities in the postproduction field. On the eve of a meeting between Foley representatives and the Teamsters, the Editors Guild Local 700 informed the Foley group that they were claiming jurisdiction over all remaining direct-to-picture professionals who were not already in the Editors Guild. Industry observers have speculated that the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) intervened and pressured the Editors Guild to accept Foley performers into their local union since the Teamsters did not have jurisdiction over labourers in postproduction.⁶ Given that some Foley performers were already in the Editors Guild as ‘sound editors’, the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) and the AMPTP offered the remaining non-unionized performers an opportunity to sign IATSE authorization cards.

6 Quoted in Dave McNary, ‘Foley artists sound off over union deal’, *Daily Variety*, 25 July 2006, p. 3.

Negotiations between IATSE and the AMPTP in the winter of 2005 led to an agreement with the Editors Guild in March 2006, with its members ratifying a pact that would include Foley performers as part of the sound editors’ local. The clandestine nature of these negotiations forced the Foley representatives to accept the terms of an agreement on which they had little input. As a result, in the summer of 2006 a group of fifty Los Angeles-based Foley artists filed a complaint with the federal government over ‘alleged misrepresentation’ by IATSE representatives. At the time, *Daily Variety* reported that IATSE forced them to remain in a union to which they did not wish to belong. The complaint read, in part,

We were pressured into signing authorization cards and joining Local 700 by being told that that would give them more power to negotiate on our

behalf. Local 700 did not negotiate on our behalf. Local 700 didn't even ask what we would want in a contract.⁷

The Foley group had not anticipated that joining an IATSE local would infringe on their pay rate; if anything, they had hoped union representation would clarify their job description and provide added employment benefits to one of the few non-unionized groups of skilled workers in Hollywood. There was, however, serious resistance to the terms outlined in the 2006 Basic Agreement that stipulated that Foley artists would receive a salary cut of eighteen per cent in order to place them on a par with the sound editors' basic daily minimum of \$370 rather than their standard rate of \$450. The complaint concluded, 'As a result, many of us are facing a worse deal than what we have before the so-called negotiations took place'. Although IATSE representation would have meant that non-union projects would have to pay a minimum benchmark salary to Foley artists, the cuts seemed largely counterintuitive to the group's original demands.

Foley artists eventually accepted the terms of the Basic Agreement and they continue to be affiliated with the Editors Guild, even though issues of professional identity and representation persist. With the transition of rerecording mixers to Local 700, the Editors Guild employs a split pair of field representatives, one for the editors and another for the mixers. According to Moore, the question of who represents the interests of Foley practitioners remains a key issue as Local 700 becomes acquainted with the task structures and occupational identity of Foley practitioners. The Editors Guild remains the representative body for sound and picture editors, and the blurred nature of Foley performance has largely confounded the executive branch of the Guild, which is not yet familiar with the needs and working practices of Foley professionals.

That Foley was brought under the wing of the industry's largest postproduction union can be seen as an effect of the modern mode of production in the Los Angeles film industry. The freelance system of sound production in contemporary Hollywood has reconfigured the technical, creative and social processes of production in ways that have encouraged independent practitioners to develop a form of intellectual property aligned to signature techniques and a network of professional relationships that can support a career in the sound industry. According to Foley artist Gary Hecker:

People have tried to do it on machines, but Foley is mimicking actions. Some of it you can do, but it doesn't have that human touch and that human rhythm behind it. There is something organic about having a human do it.⁸

In many ways, the so-called 'human element' has had a pivotal effect on the way in which technology has remapped the occupational ideology of Foley.

In the years following the collapse of the studio system, the Hollywood sound community continued to use magnetic film as its preferred stock for recording and editing effects. A legacy from 1950s experiments with

8 Quoted in David John Farinella, 'Digital upgrades boost Foley range', *Daily Variety*, 5 January 2007, p. A2.

9 Quoted in Blair Jackson, 'Foley recording: film sound's misunderstood art', *Mix*, September 2005, p. 58, <http://mixonline.com/mag/audio_foley_recording/> accessed 12 May 2014.

widescreen and stereophonic sound, magnetic recording offered improved audio quality and multitrack capabilities. While studio era 'soundmen' would traditionally perform Foley effects in a single pass, it was not uncommon in the 1950s and 1960s for practitioners to separate specific effects and combine them later using multitrack magnetic stock. In terms of aesthetic practice, the adoption of 24-track recording represented an expanded template of creative options for Foley artists like John Roesch. The expansion of tracks essentially gave Roesch and his peers the ability to include more elements with clearer separation. Additionally, the value of 24-track in the freelancer market meant that independent sound shops could advertise themselves as having state-of-the-art equipment. Throughout the 1980s, Roesch's TAJ Soundworks billed itself as being one of the only Foley shops in Los Angeles with a Dolby SR multitrack system. In addition to the technical cachet of the multitrack system, Roesch and his colleagues at TAJ were also establishing a unique Foley aesthetic using an array of new techniques to record and mix Foley effects. During this time it was standard recording practice to employ two microphones for a basic setup: one close and one far away. As Roesch explains, 'The old thinking was to do everything pretty close-miked. But what you really got was a huge bashing footstep that had no detail to it.'⁹ Challenging this logic, Roesch and his colleagues established the practice of miking for two distances, and choosing among a range of microphone types to best capture a particular sound. In an effort to dismantle the outmoded studio hierarchies of Foley performance and mixing, Roesch developed a conceptual approach that tied the duties of the performer to the mixer, leading some to call him a Foley director. In this way, the novelty of unusual miking strategies encouraged performers and mixers to consider the sound of Foley as something that could be individualized and attributable to a particular stylistic choice.

The transition to digital audio workstations in the late 1990s did not so much reconfigure Foley workflow as cement the techniques and collaborative tasks that had arisen in the 1980s. Despite claims that digital workflow has provided Foley performers and mixers with more creative options, many techniques of the digital era were already fashionable in the 1980s and early 1990s when crews were still managing 24-track analogue machines. Manipulating the sound of an original recording was indeed characteristic of an approach that was born out of the effects work of Roesch and TAJ Soundworks in the 1980s. Although the equipment has changed, the fundamental concept of augmenting an audio track using reverberating, equalizers and pitch shifting has not redefined the process.

Digital workstations, however, did have a profound effect on the workflow of Foley professionals in four fundamental ways. First, digital workstations offered mixers no fixed limits on tracks. Not confined to the limitations of a multitrack recorder, the digital workstation afforded Foley mixers the luxury of separating a complex series of effects and playing back the reel instantly. With film-based recording media, Foley professionals often performed two or more sets of actions on the same track, thereby necessitating the presence of two performers on the stage at one time. As a

result, the marriage of two or more effects on the same track eliminated the need for mixers to separate every element onto its own track; however, this process placed a strain on the mixer to capture each sound in its proper perspective. Consequently, limitless track counts and the speed of digital delivery have had an inverse effect on budgeting and scheduling. Although it is still common for high-budget releases to receive a Foley schedule of twenty to thirty days, many smaller productions are faced with schedules lasting a week or less. As a result, Foley professionals have stressed the importance of the relationship between Foley and the supervising sound editor, whose job it is to provide a cue list of sound effect requests. Supervisors can earn the trust of Foley crews by delegating work that is proportional to the time given to complete the project. According to Moore, for example, Foley crews must be able to serve the needs of the filmmaker client but not at the expense of the budget and schedule. As with the other components in the sound chain, Foley practitioners manage social obligations in addition to the aesthetic demands of their job. In this sense, Moore's common refrain to filmmakers – 'What do you want me to hear?' – comes at a cost of time and resources.¹⁰

¹⁰ Personal interview with Alyson Dee Moore, 23 June 2009.

Second, the biggest change in Foley technology, according to industry journalist Michael Kunkes, has been in the control room, where 'the positions of recordist and mixer have basically been combined into a single job with responsibilities, with the mixers (called engineers in New York) doing double duty, a move made possible by the adoption of Digidesign's Pro Tools workstation'.¹¹ While Pro Tools has provided mixers with a more organized work environment – a Foley mixer can call up a series of similar cues so that the performer can work through material by one actor or on the same surface at once – the downside, notes Leslie Bloom, is that 'the studio now has a new library to pull sound effects from. Foley artists have no recourse or receive no residual from the re-use of our sounds.'¹²

¹¹ Quoted in Michael Kunkes, 'Foley: they make the noises for the talkies', *Editors Guild Magazine*, vol. 29, no. 5 (2008), n.p.

¹² *Ibid.*

Third, the post-divestment period in the 1990s witnessed the emergence of a marketplace dominated by independent sound shops and major studio postproduction facilities. The relative portability and affordability of digital workstations has meant that independent freelancers could set up ersatz Foley stages and mixing consoles in their garage. In contrast to studio Foley stages, most independent operations employ only one Foley artist. Because modern Foley practices separate every sound element onto its own track, doubling up tracks with two or more actions (and thereby employing two artists) is no longer necessary. As Monique Redmond explains: 'Pro Tools has been really good and bad for the industry. In some ways it's been great because you can redo a take very quickly. But it's also brought down the budgets because people are doing guerilla Foley in their garages.'¹³

¹³ Quoted in Woody Woodhall, 'Interview – Monique Redmond – Foley artist', *Woody's Sound Advice*, 14 July 2008, <<http://www.woodyssoundadvice.com/2008/07/14/interview-monique-reymond-foley-artist/>> accessed: 15 March 2014.

Finally, the random-access nature of picture editing platforms has made it easier for filmmakers to experiment with the footage and produce multiple versions of a sequence. Consequently, any changes to a scene may require sound editorial and Foley to rerecord certain effects. In this way, the Foley process has become far less streamlined than in the past. Even though digital editing tools have provided greater workflow flexibility, filmmakers are not

locked into the cut of a film until much later in the process. Foley mixer MaryJo Lang contextualizes the constraints of digital Foley mixing:

In the days of [magnetic] film we used to get it towards the end. It was pretty much finalized, and the version we got was nine times out of ten the version that went on the screen. But these days with digital editing it can change daily. It's challenging. So, when you've finished a project you're never *really* finished.¹⁴

14 Personal interview with MaryJo Lang, 13 April 2009.

At the same time, however, the constraints of digital workflow have actually made it easier for Foley practitioners to define their work in concrete terms.

The repositioning of Foley performers from practitioners to artists was precipitated by the expanded role of sound editors in the late 1970s. Loosening the grip on the segmented work of sound professionals, editors such as Walter Murch and Ben Burt in San Francisco blurred the line between what was traditionally understood as sound editorial and Foley. On films such as *The Conversation* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1974) and *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977), these editors recorded new sound effects in a variety of interior and exterior environments in order to provide signature sounds that could not be found in any library. Loosening the grip on the hierarchical work of studio-era sound practitioners, Murch and Burt were combining the work of Foley with that of sound editorial by recording new elements and then 'sculpting' them using signal-processing tools, adding reverb, and slowing or speeding up the sounds in order to create an entirely original sound effect. Working outside the jurisdiction of the Editors Guild, these Northern Californian 'sound designers' were not only inventing new ways of working with sound but also conceptualizing a new sound chain. The expansion of sound editorial in San Francisco coincided with the growth of Foley in the Los Angeles sound community. For a long time the task structure of Foley performers had been limited to a narrow field of effects work. As Roesch notes,

There was an old guard that said, 'Okay, we'll do some footsteps here, some key jangle there, but we're not going to do a glass break, we're not going to do a body fall, we're not going to do some rain effect on a window' ... they came under the category of effects.¹⁵

15 Quoted in Jackson, 'Foley recording', p. 58.

In other words, there were not only highly codified ways of recording sound in the studio era, but also a rigid system of what the Foley department would handle. By the early 1980s, many of these strictures were loosened and Foley experienced a dramatic shift in occupational structure.

The expansion of Foley duties in Hollywood also came at a time when the new sound technology of Dolby Stereo had begun to enhance the dramatic potential of sound effects with its multichannel speaker array and low noise floor. Not encumbered by studio mandates or union regulations, Los Angeles-based Foley performers expanded the domain of Foley into sound effects; that is, in addition to the need for footsteps, Foley also handled intricate cloth movements or rain pitter-pattering on a window. This expansion in their operations can be read, as I have suggested, as a response

to the freelance workforce of modern Hollywood. With the rise of independent sound shops and freelance Foley performers, finding a unique angle to the craft became a necessity.

One of the pioneers of this expanded Foley practice was Roesch. With two partners he created TAJ Soundworks in 1982, and the company quickly grew to become one of the top Foley houses. Roesch himself became one of the industry's leading Foley performers, working with high-level supervising sound editors such as Charles Campbell and Gordon Ecker, Jr. Throughout the 1980s, with the encouragement of some directors and supervising sound editors, Roesch tailored functional Foley effects to the demands of the narrative. In *Back to the Future* (Robert Zemeckis, 1985), also supervised by Charles Campbell, many of the film's original sound elements were created on the Foley stage, constituting what Roesch has called one of the first 'all-in-one Foley shows', where the line between sound effects and Foley was essentially blurred. Sounds that were not the traditional domain of Foley – doors, complex weaponry, mechanical sounds, car noises, and so on – became a stylistic signature of Roesch's work. Amazingly, the entire opening sequence of *Back to the Future*, featuring a mechanical dog feeder, coffee maker, rolling skateboard, and Marty McFly's (Michael J. Fox) entrance, is performed by Roesch and his Foley crew (figure 1). Roesch comments,

What is not necessarily communicated well is that Foley is custom sound effects. Not that what we do is better than field recording – not at all. It's just that there are times when Foley can be done potentially with a greater degree of accuracy.¹⁶

The newer practice and ideology of Foley practitioners has not eliminated the need for, and desire of, sound effects recordists and editors to design custom sound elements. However, Roesch and his current Foley crew consider their work to be the raw ingredients of sound effects that are later married to other elements by sound editors and rerecording mixers. Indeed, the separation between Foley and sound effects editorial is, ultimately, tied to the needs of the particular film. Moore suggests that Foley will typically

16 Personal interview with John Roesch, 2 April 2009.



Fig. 1. The opening scene from *Back to the Future* (Robert Zemeckis, Universal Studios, 1985) features the Foley work of John Roesch.

be responsible for most footsteps, costume cloth movement, props and ephemeral elements such as debris, water and dust, while doors, explosions, weapons fire and vehicle engines constitute the domain of sound effects editorial. Even so, Moore might 'sweeten' an explosion with sounds of cascading rubble and cracking concrete, or she might also add leathery creaks to a vehicle's interior seating to help sell the age of the car.

Fundamentally, the expanded domain of Foley has widened the occupational structure of Foley performers to the point where they consider themselves artistic contributors to the sound production process. By the early 2000s it was not uncommon for Foley performers to be credited as 'Foley artists'. The artist designation acknowledges the level of technical skill and creativity inherent to the job. Combining the resourceful and artful approach innovated by Jack Foley and the modern need to establish a professional style, the work of contemporary Foley artists has been imbued with a performative rigour that is at once a natural extension of the actor and a textural element that supports the dramatic functions of the narrative.

When asked to describe their current task structures, many Foley artists emphasize three expressive components of their job. First, essential prop materials provide the basis for the Foley artist's creative interpretation of a sound element and its dramatic function within the narrative. In most situations, Foley artists approach the task of sound creation differently, choosing to imbue an onscreen prop with a signature sonic character. Despite the conventional wisdom that some objects sound better for certain effects, Foley artists balance historical convention with artistic innovation: celery, a longstanding staple of the Foley trade, has substituted for bone snaps; laundry detergent has been used for anything 'gloopy', including gruesome body horror effects; a piece of leather combined with jangling keys often passes for 'cop gear'. At Warner Bros., Roesch and his Foley partner, Alyson Dee Moore, have amassed an impressive collection of props and surfaces for their work. Stacked high on one wall of the Foley stage is a neatly organized collection of props separated by type in plastic containers: eye glasses, hinges, can openers, nails, wallets, jewellery, seatbelts, mobile phones, dog chains, door knobs, guns and ammunition, cigarettes and lighters, bowls and plates, umbrellas, currencies, brushes, and a wide assortment of paper and books. Other categories offer up an assortment of odd objects used for more unique sounds: cartoon props, fairy bells and clicking objects. Although many modern prop soundalike choices are trade secrets, Moore confesses that one of her own signature sounds is using pinecones in conjunction with a wet chamois cloth to simulate the sound of cracking bones and gore. As much as Moore is interested in collecting new props, she also relies on a stable of tried and tested materials that have worked on several films.

Second, Foley artists are required to balance the need for synchronization with emotional resonance during a performance. Foley is about the emotional and textural feel of a sound and its relationship to the scene. Foley artists handle props according to the dramatic significance of the scene; this

will include attention to an actor's performance, the period in which the film takes place, and its genre. David Fincher's *Zodiac* (2007), which explores the story of the hunt for a serial killer known as Zodiac, who killed several victims in the San Francisco Bay Area in the 1960s and 1970s, places an emphasis on the cryptic letters the killer supposedly sent to the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Moore and Roesch were tasked with emphasizing the *sound* of these infamous letters. Reproducing the sound of paper – newspapers, books, letters – is a common Foley element, but the *Zodiac* letters carried with them a certain dramatic weight that Moore and Roesch needed to convey as the film's characters inspected them, touched them, and then passed them around a large conference table. The paper cues needed to be precise and pronounced, without being overstated (figure 2).

Third, Foley artists place a practical importance on being able to 'hit sync' and ensure the performance fits into the flow of the production track. The symbiotic values of feel and sync are often intertwined with the Foley artist's talent for landing a cue and placing emphasis on its dramatic dimensions. In many ways, digital workstations have eliminated the need for artists to hit sync perfectly, since the Foley editor can tighten a cue and improve sync in the workstation. Ament agrees that digital editing platforms have eased the strict adherence to synchronization: 'The answer lies in remembering why Foley was developed as a craft. Footsteps do not have an impact that can be measured. Each actor has a different way of walking. The artist reproduces this performance sonically.'¹⁷ Thus the Foley artist is doing more than simply reproducing a way of walking, or the way a prop is used by a character; they are performing the *feel* of an action.

That contemporary Foley artists describe their work in such emotional terms – the *feel* of a prop is performed, not edited – is borne out in Ament's suggestion that filmmakers are not preoccupied with the actual prop being used to simulate a sound but instead concentrate on its sonic qualities: 'The lesson is simple: watch the film and listen to the prop. Don't watch the prop. It affects your perception.'¹⁸ This particular logic of practice has influenced the inventory of sound cues provided by Foley in contemporary Hollywood films. What is particularly noteworthy about the kinds of sounds performed by Foley artists are the descriptive designations assigned to props. Keeping in mind that every film has its own unique set of Foley requirements, there is an assortment of props that appear with some consistency in most films:

17 Ament, *The Foley Grail*, p. 106.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 99.

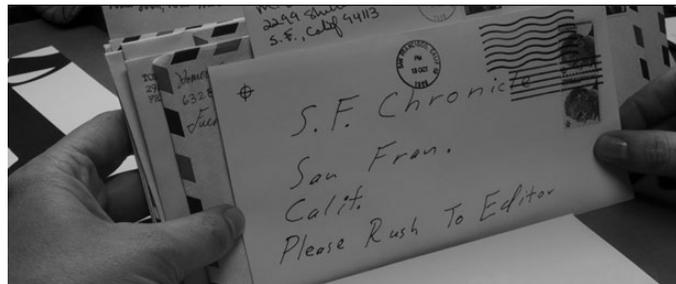


Fig. 2. The Foley textures of paper in *Zodiac* (David Fincher, Warner Bros. Entertainment, 2007).

chairs, paper, silverware, drinking glasses, clothing rustle, handguns, handshakes, handgrabs, foliage and debris. Modern Foley practices emphasize the resonance of even the most pedestrian of props in a method known as adding ‘life’ to objects and materials. For instance, a basic wooden chair may creak and bend as a character moves around in it; in a comedy, ‘chair life’ can be played for laughs to punctuate the weight of a character, while in an interrogation sequence the sound of the chair can be used to amplify the tense exchange between characters. Characters wielding weapons of various sizes demonstrate a more overt instance of adding ‘life’ to prop effects. ‘Gun life’ is characterized by the rattling sound a weapon makes when a character picks up a gun and moves it around in his or her hands. Although most real guns make very few incidental sounds when handled properly, Foley artists use ‘gun life’ to accentuate a weapon’s dramatic presence. In what has become a trope of action-adventure films, characters will dramatically cock their weapon as a show of impending force. In certain situations, a character will ‘click hello’, announcing their presence by the sound of their gun.

Almost by default, modern Foley artists tap into an actor’s performance to gain a sense of their character. Leslie Bloom argues that

Foley is a performance art. A person on the street who just won the lottery and walks five steps from a building to his car is going to walk with a totally different attitude than a person who ran those same five steps after robbing a bank.¹⁹

19 Quoted in Kunkes, ‘Foley: they make the noises for the talkies’.

Such attention to character intention has set into relief the value of Foley artistry over the use of a stock effect. Some have called this approach ‘method Foley’, since the artist works not only to approximate the appropriate sync for footsteps but also to communicate an emotional tone with the actor’s movements. Discussing the expressive qualities of modern Foley, Moore suggests that ‘you could probably take five different Foley artists and give them the same scene and it would be similar, but they would all sound a little different because everyone has a different ear’.²⁰ According to Moore, there is an added value to Foley performance that is as dependent on character as it is on recreating the representational aspects of floor and prop surfaces.

20 Interview with Alyson Dee Moore, 9 February 2009.

In *The Dark Knight* (Christopher Nolan, 2008), Roesch and Moore chose silky fabrics for the Joker’s cloth movement to offset the heavy plastic and leathery sounds of Batman’s costume. The interrogation scene at the film’s mid-point offers a study in contrasts: the brooding, lumbering textures of Batman and the light, almost slippery textures of the Joker’s ensemble. There is a definable weight to Batman’s movements contrasted with the slightness – one could say levity – of the Joker, which are communicated almost exclusively by ‘cloth life’. It seems an obvious choice to convey Batman as an overpowering threat, since he is after all trying to obtain crucial information from the Joker, but Roesch and Moore’s choice to keep the Joker silky and nimble adds a level of frustration to the scene. The Joker is not about to give in to Batman’s physical threats and seems genuinely

21 Interview with MaryJo Lang, 13 April 2009.

22 John Belton, 'Technology and aesthetics of film sound', in Elisabeth Weis and John Belton (eds), *Film Sound: Theory and Practice* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 66.

unimpressed with his show of strength; instead, he acts and sounds like a slippery object that Batman cannot contain (figure 3).

The attention to such textural detail and the degree of intentionality behind the rendering of sound suggests that Foley represents a kind of 'heightened reality'.²¹ There is nothing inherently natural about Foley (or cinema sound in general) and its function on the soundtrack. The custom sound of modern Foley is designed by artists to work effortlessly within the sound world of a film, but also to punctuate and characterize certain elements such as prop life and character movements. What creates balance between these two functions is the relationship between Foley as guarantor of reality and its role as an expressive enhancement. In one sense, Foley effects function to provide a certain kind of authenticity to the image: we see someone walking on pavement, thus we hear footfalls on the same surface. However, as I have demonstrated, contemporary Foley practices offer creative opportunities beyond simply supplying credibility to the image. Foley can also punctuate props, clothing and character movement with an expressive resonance that has grown out of the shift in task structures experienced by Foley artists over the last thirty years. In accordance with this shift, John Belton has argued that cinema sound does not always have to conform to reality, suggesting that 'Images attain credibility in the conformation to objective reality; sounds in their conformation to the image of that reality, to a derivative reconstruction of objective reality'.²² Sound is dependent on the 'derivative reconstruction' of a particular reality that is aligned with the one created by the image, and, by extension, the narrative drama. The construction of a cinematic sound world is thus not always or necessarily dependent on a faithful representation of reality.

The Foley artist's focus is therefore concerned with balancing how sounds can be employed to amplify the dynamics and feel of the world represented *on screen* (the derivation of reality) as well as adhering to a sound's naturalistic and accurate reproduction *as if* it were the real world. This balance between heightened detail and naturalism can be found in Roesch and Moore's Foley work in *Zodiac*. In the Lake Berryessa sequence, Cecilia Shepard (Pell James) and Brian Hartnell (Patrick Scott Lewis) are picnicking on the scenic peninsula known as Twin Oak Ridge when they are approached by a man wearing a black hooded outfit featuring an embroidered symbol resembling the cross-hair design that appeared in the



Fig. 3. A contrast in costumes: the Joker's silky ensemble and Batman's heavy armour in *The Dark Knight* (Christopher Nolan, Warner Bros. Entertainment, 2008).

cryptic 'Zodiac' letters. The hooded figure asks for money and the couple's car keys, and forces Shepard to tie Hartnell's hands together with a rope. The man then ties Shepard's hands and feet together before he abruptly stabs Hartnell in the back with a small knife. Watching this unfold, Shepard begins to scream as the assailant turns back to her and viciously stabs her back and side. This sequence, like the rest of the film, is shot with a cool detachment befitting of Fincher's docudrama aesthetic. The scene unfolds in real time with no obvious visual embellishments, which arguably makes the stabbings more startling. However, while Fincher fashioned a straightforward visual dramatization of the Lake Berryessa murder of Cecilia Shepard and assault of Brian Hartnell, what is less obvious is the apparent tension between the naturalistic visuals and the heightened detail of the Foley sound effects during the stabbings. Throughout the scene there is an overall Foley presence that captures the heavy cloth movement of the killer's outfit, his lumbering footfalls, tying the rope, Hartnell's body slam to the ground, and the pistol's bullet magazine being removed as the killer shows the couple that it is loaded. The stabbing itself is quite brief, lasting less than fifteen seconds, but the sound work manages to convey a resonant feeling of genuine alarm in this short period. Set against these Foley effects is a detailed background track filled with the serene sounds of nature: birds chirp, crickets chirrup, and a gentle wind blows through the leaves. As he begins to stab Hartnell, the knife thrusts are accompanied by the killer's own throaty grunts; at the same time, Cecilia begins to scream and partially drowns out the killer's mumbling groans. As the killer turns to Cecilia, David Shire's score creeps in with a sustained bass line that barely rises above the background ambience.

What is particularly striking about the Foley effects in this scene is their ability to cut through the other layers of sound with precision and clarity. The decision to emphasize the stabbing sounds was made by director Fincher and his longtime sound supervisor Ren Klyce, whose relationship with Roesch at Warner Bros. originates with Fincher's 1997 film *The Game*. Moore explains the Foley requests for the stabbings:

I did the sound of the stabbing in the back and chest and it was very gruesome and bloody. Fincher called and said, 'Sounds great, but now I want to hear the knife hitting her rib bone'. So we did that. And then he said, 'OK great. Now I want to hear the air escaping from her lungs.' So we did that. That's something that I'm sure they cut it into something else, but we'll do sounds that will help sell the sound and put it over the top.²³

To hear the fine-grained sounds of the metal blade hitting bone and air escaping through the stab wound, Moore produced a heightened effect comprised of several Foley layers that was eventually married to the other tracks. While apparently 'over the top', in fact, the request from Fincher is also driven by a desire for historical accuracy, as evidence from the case itself suggests that the Zodiac's blade did actually strike Cecilia Shepard's rib and puncture her lung. Fincher's call for the detailed Foley effect therefore supports the notion that Foley artistry is a balancing act: it is as

23 Interview with Alyson Dee Moore, 23 June 2009.

24 Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, trans Claudia Gorbman (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 109.

much about reproducing a credible sound world as it is about intensifying that sound world in conjunction with the emotional demands of the scene.

These heightened Foley effects constitute what Michel Chion has called ‘rendered sounds’, which function to convey tactile sensations into auditory sensations.²⁴ Rendering emphasizes the feel associated with a particular sound through exaggeration and intensity. Chion suggests that cinema sound exaggerates the contrast of intensity to convey expressively a range of details that would otherwise be lost if they were reproduced in reality. In this way, Foley sound articulates the relationship between expressivity and tactile sensation by punctuating the smallest of sounds with the dramatic intensity of a car crash. Moore’s ‘over the top’ method to ‘help sell the sound’ supports Chion’s general theory, but it also says something about the art and craft of modern Foley performance. Rendered sound is actually the result of a large-scale professional transition among Foley performers to distinguish themselves as sound artists who bring sounds to life and provide, in the words of Roesch, each film with a set of ‘custom sound effects’ that are not available in any sound effects library.

The need to reevaluate Foley in terms of occupational ideology, task structure and aesthetic practice is the outcome of decades of change in the technologies of sound reproduction and the institutional structure of Hollywood filmmaking. By adopting an expanded task structure, the occupational ideology of Foley practices has undergone an aesthetic expansion that is largely wrought from the economic structure of the industry and changes in sound technology throughout the post-divestment era. The modern Foley stage has become a site of aesthetic innovation where ‘custom sound effects’ and notions of personal authorship have reshaped what was once a detached and perfunctory role in the postproduction sound chain. The process of adding detailed ‘life’ to the smallest of sounds has as much to do with performance as it does with providing a fine-grained, almost subliminal layer of aural definition.

The concentration on texture and dramatic feel supports the notion that in the age of the modern sound professional, Foley occupies an increasingly important role in the aesthetic decision-making process. With more films calling for greater Foley coverage to augment or take the place of traditional sound effects, Foley crews are adapting to increased demand on tighter schedules and lower budgets. While digital workstations have eased the strict reliance on matching synchronization and given mixers more options to process the sounds, changes in sound technology have contributed to the shortening of schedules and expectations for greater coverage.

Given the tumultuous history between Foley and organized labour in Hollywood, it is not surprising that the shifts in occupational identity and ideology were concomitant with the belated recognition of Foley artistry as a unique craft by International Representatives and the Editors Guild. Decades of misrepresentation and misrecognition among sound professionals strengthened the mandate of Foley practitioners to develop stylistic signatures that were unique and predicated on the artful and, as Roesch suggests, ‘soulful’ reproduction of sound effects. In doing so, Foley

25 Quoted in Ament, *The Foley Grail*, p. 14.

underwent an occupational shift from direct-to-picture performer to creative agent with an eye towards matching sync and an ear towards dramatic embellishment. As veteran Foley artist Robert Rutledge says, ‘You have to get the feel right. You can cut sync. You can’t cut “feel”.’²⁵

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